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DRINK:

A WEST AFRICAN PROBLEM

By

THOMAS WELSH

DRINK IN WEST AFRICA.

SIR HUGH CLIFFORD'S valedictory address to the Legislative Council in Nigeria has just been received, and in it he refers to the wisdom or otherwise of countenancing the trade in imported intoxicating liquors with races in a primitive state of development. His view is that prohibition is unworkable, and it is shared, I believe, by almost every merchant, and probably most of the officials, interested in West Africa. I am as deeply concerned as anyone can be at the severance of Sir Hugh's connection with Nigeria, and appreciate to the full his vigorous and unsparing work while Governor: on most questions I would be found in agreement with him, but I cannot readily drop the convictions of a lifetime; and on this we differ fundamentally.

I have been actively engaged in the trade with Nigeria for fully 45 years, and always frankly hostile to the trade in liquor, and I estimate social and moral progress as more important than material, and alcohol is, if not fatal, at least a hindrance to both. This is recognised universally, and the fact that liquor is almost everywhere a controlled and not a free trade is indicated by licensing laws. In West Africa it is permitted mainly because of its usefulness as a revenue-producing import, and its advocates base their claims for its continuance on that ground. From alcohol the greater portion of the revenue collected in our West African Colonies has been obtained; it has helped to build railways, make roads, and thus provide occupation for a great number of officials. These advantages have followed the advent of peace in the interior and the introduction of decent government. If these things, however, can be done without revenue from alcohol, and I think they can, then Sir Hugh's reasoning is faulty. It certainly is a fact that prohibition has never really been tried.

When I first set foot in Nigeria, apart from the small Colony of Lagos, all that great country, now 346,000 square miles in area, and with a population of nineteen and a half millions, was under native rule. The sole representative of a civilised government was the British Consul, whose residence was on the Spanish Island of Fernando Po, and who visited the mainland when opportunity or necessity arose. There being no Government, there were no taxes beyond a trifling levy on exports, perhaps one or two per cent. in amount, which the most powerful native for the time being put into his pocket.

Naturally, liquor was cheap, and the trade in it great and growing. Dutch and German gin, not bad in quality, was sold at 6d. a bottle ; in one dozen cases, containing nearly two gallons, at about 5/6 a case. I have known seventy-five cases of gin, about 140 gallons, sold for a puncheon of palm oil, containing 180 gallons—almost a gallon of gin for a gallon of oil. To-day, with a duty of 25/- a gallon, the gin paid for 180 gallons of oil would be about 10 gallons.

At that time everyone said trade could not be carried on without liquor ; It can ! One or two firms I know have managed to carry on without it for about 40 years.

Another oft-repeated statement was that the damp and enervating climate rendered alcohol a necessity, and that Africans would not work without the stimulus of drink. The evidence of many missionaries and of others disproves the first statement, and the figures which follow disprove the second.

During the six years 1910-1915, the average annual import of spirits by Nigeria was 4,021,000 gallons, while the average annual export of palm oil and palm kernels was 247,710 tons. During the following six years, 1916-1921, which include three years of the Great War, the average annual import of spirits was 352,600 gallons, and the average annual export of palm oil and palm kernels 266,157 tons—a fall of 91 per cent in imports of spirits coinciding with a rise of 7 per cent. in exports of palm produce. Lean years in liquor meant fat years in production. No doubt other factors were operative, but the fact remains that the African will work, and work better without, than with liquor.

Still one more argument, the most modern, and I think the most foolish, is that native fermented drinks are more deleterious than imported distilled liquor. How can a fermented light beer or wine containing 4 or 5 per cent. of alcohol be more deleterious than distilled spirits with 40 or 50 per cent. ? The Committee of Enquiry into the Liquor Trade in Southern Nigeria which visited that Colony in 1909, sent home fourteen samples of native-made palm wine and 120 samples of imported rum and gin ; these were analysed by the late Sir Edward Thorpe, F.R.S., and his staff at the Government laboratories in London. The average strength of the samples of palm wine was 4.69 per cent. of absolute alcohol ; of the rum and gin 44.86 per cent.

Some years earlier Sir William McGregor, when Governor of Lagos, had some analyses made of palm wine, with the following results :—

From the *raphia vinifera* palm, which is the principal source of supply, the percentage of absolute alcohol was 1.67 per cent. ;

after seven days, when fermentation had probably ceased, 2.79 per cent. From the *elais guineensis* (the oil palm), after seven days, 2.57 per cent.

Yet another argument is that if we do not give the African gin he will cut down or tap his oil palms that he may draw the sap from them and so obtain a plentiful supply of palm wine ; he may do so, but it is unlikely, as the oil palm is only useful, in the commercial sense, when alive ; again, land tenure is communal, and the people would never allow individual members of the community to destroy the most important of their economic plants. The *raphia vinifera*, the fibre and wine-making palm, as the name implies, is only useful when dead ; from it we obtain piassava, used in the making of coarse brushes and in producing a fine charcoal, one of the constituents of gunpowder. It is used in making the lattice work of the roofs and sides of African huts, and the leaflets in making roofing mats, and is a most useful tree when cut down.

Mr. Boyle, when Lieutenant-Governor of Nigeria five or six years ago, made inquiry on this point, and in an address to the Legislative Council spoke as follows :—

> With regard to the question of spirits, I have been enquiring from all parts of the Southern Provinces if there has been any increase in the number of palm trees felled with the object of preparing palm wine from them, and I cannot find that there has been any increase. I think that is one more argument in favour of decreasing as far as possible the importation of spirits, and increasing the imports of British cotton and other goods. It used to be argued that if we decrease the importation of spirits, the palm trees will be severely tapped for palm wine, and the export of palm produce will suffer. As a fact, so far as we can now see, the decrease of spirits has not had that effect.

Now, as to the extent of the trade, Lagos and Southern Nigeria jointly during the five years 1900 to 1904 imported 13,783,150 gallons. If we take the cost landed price including duty as 8s. a gallon, we have £5,000,000 spent in liquor by Nigeria during the five years mentioned. In this connection it is worth while quoting the words spoken by Governor-General Sir Frederick Lugard to the Nigerian Council in 1916 :—

> It would be to the benefit of Nigeria if these foreign imports of spirits were replaced by articles of more value to the people of this country, articles more calculated to raise their standard of life and comfort, and to increase the output of the industries from which they derive their wealth—agricultural instruments, and tools, textiles, articles of household use, motor cars, bicycles, salt, and such like necessities.

If we take our four British West African Colonies during the seven years 1907 to 1913, the total imports of liquor were 42,833,716 gallons. The duties during these years were higher than during the period beforementioned, but if we take the cost landed price including duty as 10s. a gallon, we have in seven years an expenditure by our "undeveloped estates," in West Africa, of a long way over £21,000,000 in liquor. During the following seven years, 1914 to 1920, the quantity imported by the four colonies was 16,128,947 gallons, a great reduction, due partly to the war, and partly to higher taxation. Note the effect upon production: exports of cocoa from the Gold Coast and Nigeria alone were, during 1907 to 1913, 212,754 tons; during 1914 to 1920, 752,110 tons. Twenty-six million gallons less liquor means at 10s. a gallon, a saving of £13,000,000 in the drink bill; and 540,000 tons more cocoa, at £24 a ton, a gain of £13,000,000. Could any figures be more impressive?

I do not suggest that the increased production was entirely due to the smaller imports of liquor; better seasons, higher prices, greater demand, may all have helped to swell the total, but some improvement was no doubt due to increased sobriety; £13,000,000 saved on the drink bill, and £13,000,000 gained by increased exports.

Now, as to the efforts to reduce the consumption of alcohol, an account of the agitation for reform and of the present day position may not prove uninteresting.

In early days of West African history missionaries and temperance people conducted a sporadic sort of campaign against the trade and the evils which, judging from the experience at home, would follow from it; but there was no concerted opposition until 1887 or 1888, when the "Native Races and the Liquor Traffic United Committee," as it is called, came into being. The executive committee of this body has forty-four members, composed of thirteen foreign missionary societies and of eleven temperance societies, with seven personal members.

In addition, there are about 40 vice-presidents, amongst whom are a dozen bishops, some leading men connected with all the Free Churches, and representative men notable in medicine, administration, and commerce—altogether a remarkable body united in opposition to what they consider a dangerous and unprofitable trade.

One reason for forming the Committee was the rapid development of the African Continent, the making of roads and railways, and the clearing of waterways which followed upon the scramble for Africa in 1885; these developments rendered districts accessible which were formerly untouched by European distilled liquor.

The Committee, I understand, works first and foremost for prohibition, and also as a step thereto, for higher duties, and the fixing of zones of prohibition on the lines adopted by the Royal Niger Company in the countries, Mohammedan and pagan, lying beyond 6.30° north latitude. It also endeavoured unsuccessfully, to get the British Government to agree that those prohibition areas should be gradually extended coastwards—what might be called reform from the interior.

The Native Races Committee has kept in touch with the Colonial Office, and since the time of Lord Knutsford many secretaries of state have expressed sympathy with it and its objects, and have sanctioned gradual increases in duty. In 1890 the duty in Lagos was 6d. per gallon ; in 1891, 8d. ; in 1893, 1s., then 2s. ; and in 1918 it was raised to 10s., and a year later to 25s.

Early in 1919 the late Lord Long, then Mr. Walter Long, Secretary of State for the Colonies, speaking of this branch of trade, said :—

> Some time ago I made up my mind that it would be my duty to advise the representatives of the British Government at the Peace Conference to propose, on our own initiative, the abolition of the liquor traffic in West Africa. We ought to put an end to this traffic, for it has certainly been conducive to great evil and to great misfortune.

This recommendation was carried out, and the Peace Conference in the Covenant of the League of Nations, Article 22, referring to the responsibility of each Mandatory for the territory to be administered, declared it to be subject, amongst other things, to "the prohibition of abuses such as the slave trade, the arms traffic, and the liquor traffic," Bracketing the liquor traffic with the slave trade seems scarcely fair—but there it is.

The Covenant was presented to Parliament in June, 1919, and on September 10th in that year the Convention was signed at St. Germain-en-Laye ; under Article 1 the High Contracting parties undertook

> to apply certain measures for the restriction of the liquor traffic in the territories which are or may be subject to their control throughout the whole of the Continent of Africa, with the exception of Algiers, Tunis, Morocco, Libya, Egypt and the Union of South Africa. The provisions applicable to the Continent of Africa shall also apply to islands lying within 100 nautical miles of the coast ; this article applies to all Colonies and Protectorates other than those mandated by the Supreme Council.

Article 2, however, reduces the value of Article 1 insomuch as the phrase " liquor traffic " in it becomes " trade spirits of every kind and of beverages mixed with these spirits."

It was contended by some interests that it was not the " liquor traffic " which was prohibited, but the " abuse of the liquor traffic." Mr. Ormsby Gore, now happily Under Secretary of State for the Colonies, settled this question when, in October, 1921, he reminded the Commission sitting at Geneva that the texts of the Covenant provided for absolute prohibition : there was no question of the abuse of the traffic ; the traffic itself was regarded as an abuse. He also stated that a request for the reduction of the duty on spirits had been refused.

To define trade spirits was the next difficulty, and after four years the attempt was abandoned, and in July 1923 the Duke of Devonshire, then Secretary of State for the Colonies, issued a statement defining the future policy of the Colonial Office on the question.

The new principle adopted is not to define the term " trade spirits," but to fix upon certain spirits which will not be regarded as such. These are as follows : whisky is not trade spirits if it is distilled from cereal grains ; rum is not if it is distilled from sugar cane products ; brandy is not if it is distilled from fermented grape juice—provided always that these three varieties of alcohol have been stored in wood for three years.

Gin is on a different footing, and no period for maturing is imposed " in the case of gin from Holland, the United Kingdom, or elsewhere."

Later the Secretary of State set up a Standing Committee to consider and advise upon :—

(1) All applications for the placing of brands of gin on the schedule of approved brands, which will be admitted into the British West African Colonies and Protectorates.

(2) Any question which may arise as to the retention on the schedule of any brand which has been placed upon it.

The title of the Committee will be : The African Liquor Traffic Control Committee, and it is to be composed as under :—

(1) An Assistant Secretary of the Colonial Office as chairman.

(2) Two persons well acquainted with the manufacture of gin.

(3) A person well acquainted with the export trade in gin to West Africa.

(4) A person well acquainted with the trade in gin in Great Britain.

(5) An analytical chemist.

(6) A member of the staff of the Colonial Office as Secretary.

The wave of moral enthusiasm evoked by the war seems to have evaporated, and, except that the cost is higher to the purchaser, matters are much as they were. The poorer native is protected by his poverty ; a man earning 1s. or 2s. a day cannot afford a bottle of gin or whisky which costs him 6s. or 7s., so that is to the good.

Members of the League of Nations' Sub-Committee, appointed to deal with mandates had no doubt as to the meaning of the phrase. Sir James Allen, for New Zealand, said their experience in the Cook Islands compelled them to have prohibition in Samoa ; Sir Joseph Cook, for Australia, advocated prohibition ; Mr. J. R. Hofmeyr, for South-west Africa, said they had prohibition of all liquor containing over two per cent. of alcohol.

General Friere d'Andrade, representing Portugal, said the problem would not be solved by control or by prohibition of one class of spirits.

At the Cape of Good Hope, in Basutoland, Bechuanaland and in the Transkei territories, either prohibition or a permit system is in operation. No African can be employed as a barman, and in Natal no licences are issued within a native location.

For selling liquor to natives the penalty in New South Wales is £10 ; in Queensland and Western Australia, £20.

Twenty-five shillings is a heavy duty, but it is not so heavy as in the Union of South Africa, where it is 35s. The Bantu race extends diagonally across Africa from Natal to Nigeria, so there is no racial difference, and yet in the Transvaal twenty years ago " no coloured person " could obtain liquor of any kind by purchase or barter, the penalty being imprisonment for three months with or without hard labour. For the person who supplied the liquor the penalty for a first offence was imprisonment for not less than six months, and, at the discretion of the court, a fine not exceeding £250 ; for a second offence the penalties were doubled ; for a third, imprisonment, and, again at the discretion of the court, a fine not exceeding £1,000. Hard labour may be added, and, in default of payment of the fine, imprisonment for a further period of not more than two years. Similar restrictions existed in the other South African dependencies, and are still in force since the Union.

In Cape Colony a permit was needed signed by an employer or someone in authority. In Swaziland a proclamation (1923) prohibits the importation of spirituous liquors except with the written permission of the Commissioner or an Assistant Commissioner. In Bechuanaland the late King Khama absolutely prohibited the importation of liquor.

The late Cecil Rhodes said that for the development of the country " absolute prohibition of intoxicating drinks was essential."

The danger spot in British West Africa is the Gold Coast. In Accra, the capital, the infantile mortality in 1918-21, four years, was 373 per 1,000 ; and there is one licence for 190 inhabitants, and, as one might expect from this fact, that Colony, with a population of under two millions, took 35 per cent. of the total imports of spirits into British West Africa during the four years 1913-16. The total population of these colonies is about twenty-three or twenty-four millions, and the Gold Coast proportion should be 8½ and not 35 per cent. What has the Gold Coast Medical Service to say about the birthrate and social conditions generally ?

Why are the two policies so divergent in principle ? In South Africa, practical prohibition so far as Africans are concerned ; in West Africa restrictions are non-existent, except in the large towns, and I believe there is no limit to the number of licences. I think the reason is this : the white population of West Africa is made up of Government officials, a few missionaries, and merchants and their staffs. If there were a large and independent white population in West Africa as in South Africa, I feel sure, that we should have as stringent regulations in the west as in the south.

The official finds liquor a means of getting an abundant indirect, and easily collected revenue, and there is a tendency to look upon economic development as equally if not more important than moral considerations. The merchants' view is, I think, that self-determination is a good working principle, that if the African wants liquor he should have it, and that the evils inherent in drink are exaggerated. The missionary, who knows more of the people, and their ways, than the other classes mentioned is opposed to the trade, which he regards as inimical to the moral and material welfare of the African.

So far I have dealt with British Dependencies, but we have also to consider how far the policy of France, whose Colonies surround Sierra Leone and the Gambia, and extend to both east and west boundaries of the Gold Coast, may affect us.

France, like ourselves, has obtained possession of enormous areas in West Africa, the shores of which for half a century had been deluged with heap liquor from Europe.

The European Governments all found the trade in full swing, and for revenue purposes and to protect the African have gradually raised the duty—France, however, generally lagging behind Britain, and so attracting commerce by lower duties.

A new spirit has, however, arisen across the Channel, and France is genuinely alarmed, for the reasons which follow, at the spread of alcoholism in her African Colonies.

M. J. Le Cesne, the President of the West African Section of the Union Coloniale Francaise, and vice-chairman of the largest French firm trading in Africa, has sounded a note of alarm, and in an address in Paris during the war stated that the abuse of alcohol carried in its train deplorable effects ; physical degeneration, diminution in the birth-rate, the spread of tuberculosis, insanity, increase in crime, etc. All along the coast from the Kroo to the Ivory Coast not more than one birth to eight adults can be reckoned ; at Bassam, 25 per cent. of the natives are consumptive. Similar effects can be verified in Dahomey, and in certain circles in Senegal, particularly in the regions where the Mussulmans are in the minority.

One birth per eight adults, with an infantile mortality of at least 50 per cent. means " letting in the bush " or the desert ; in time, the extinction of a race.

Twenty-four years ago I visited Gaboon, the French colony on the equator, and at Setta Camma, which is in the Southern part of the Colony, an old resident informed me that bush cows (*bos-caffer*) and elephants were becoming more plentiful in the coast districts. This surprised me, and I said that with the influx of trade I would have expected more people and a scarcity of big game. He replied that the population was dwindling. A few days later I was in the capital of French equatorial Africa, and was told that the Mpongwes, the coast tribe, were dying out and being replaced by the Mpangwes, a more virile and temperate tribe from the interior. It did not strike me then that alcohol was one cause of this, but I know now.

Before the time mentioned I spent several months in Porto Novo, the commercial capital of Dahomey. The spirit trade was enormous owing to the low duty ; at least 95 per cent. of the trade of one big German firm consisted of liquor, so the agent informed me. In the compounds of one of the French firms I have seen 200 puncheons of alcohol, varying in strength from 90 to 96 degrees —that is, practically absolute alcohol, and almost double the strength of proof-spirit. A very large proportion of the exports were therefore paid for, directly or indirectly, with alcohol.

Dr. Albert Schweitzer, in his book *The Edge of the Primeval Forest*, describing his first voyage up the River Ogowe in 1913, writes as follows :—

> On the banks are the ruins of abandoned huts. "When I came out here fifteen years ago," said a trader who stood near me, "these places were all flourishing villages." "And why are they so no longer?" I asked. He shrugged his shoulders and said in a low voice, "L'alcool."

Mr. H. W. Nevinson, in *A Modern Slavery*, describing life in a mission station in Angola, writes :—

> But now the Portuguese have crept up to it with their rum and sugar cane plantations. At the top of the hill was a large sweet potato plantation for rum ; at the foot of the hill, where a copious stream of water ran, a rum factory had been constructed. The hideous main building, gaunt as a Yorkshire mill ; the whitewashed rows of slave huts ; the newly-broken fields ; the barrels just beginning to send forth a loathsome stench of the new spirit ; all were as fresh and vile as civilisation could make them. But the whole country is fast degenerating owing to rum. "You see no fine old men now" is a common saying ; "rum kills them off." It is making the whole people bloated and stupid. Near the coast it is worse, but the enormous amount carried into the interior and manufactured in Bihé is telling rapidly, and I see no hope of any change so long as rum plantations of cane or sweet potato pay better than any others.

It means depopulation, a reproduction of what civilisation and drink have done for aboriginal peoples all over the world.

It was an article of faith with many that settled agricultural communities could survive alongside civilisation ; that the nomadic races were those who disappeared, as in North America and Australia. In Tasmania the last descendant of the aborigines died forty or fifty years ago. The Australian aboriginal is only kept from extermination by segregation ; the Maori, one of the finest races that ever existed, is barely preserved by strict prohibition ; in the islands of the South Seas, drink and new diseases are working havoc, and now we find similar results arising in West Africa. No wonder that France and Portugal are alarmed ; bush cows and elephants are valueless to France if another struggle should arise in Europe.

Why is America dry? It was a question of economics. There are forty-four States and six Territories in the Union, and the amendment of the Constitution, passed by the House of Representatives in December, 1917, was adopted by thirty-six

separate States within a year. It was not a purely philanthropic measure ; it was one quietly and persistently supported by big employers of labour and men in big business who knew that prohibition meant better work, bigger production, less crime, fewer accidents, and increased happiness.

For West Africa the question is not one for a Committee of merchants or officials, from whom much evidence has already been received ; it is one for doctors, political economists, and missionaries, who are disinterested, and whose sole concern would be the moral, economic, and social development of the African races.

The first step should be to work for concerted action with France, Portugal and Spain, and arrange an identical tariff ; then come into line with South Africa and raise the duty to 35s. a gallon ; then the " long last mile " to prohibition.

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From *The Nineteenth Century*, August 1925, Reprinted by permission.

NATIVE RACES AND THE LIQUOR TRAFFIC UNITED COMMITTEE,
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